

SEIU 2008 Convention Report and Analysis

A Nearly Unanimous Victory for “*Justice for All*”

“*Justice for All*” Program Wins Mandate in a Landslide of Historic Proportions

In an extraordinary accomplishment by the thousands of local union leaders, members and staff of our union who worked in some cases for more than three years to develop, discuss, rework and strengthen, debate, and decide on the comprehensive packages that make up the “*Justice for All*” Program, in the end, every single component was overwhelmingly adopted. In fact, in vote after vote, the Program was supported by more than 90% of the Convention Delegates.

The convention was preceded on Saturday by a full day of open, rigorous, and often passionate debate, where all three SEIU Industry Divisions overwhelmingly adopted their “*Strategic Unity Plan*,” including organizing goals for the next four years, and “*Program to Win*,” laying out the specific commitments for each Division in making the “*Justice for All*” Program a reality.

On the Sunday before the Convention formally started, hundreds of delegates attended day long committee meetings to discuss and debate the scores of resolutions put forward by the International Executive Board and Locals to adopt, strengthen, or attempt to alter the program direction of the union. Each of three separate committees listened to hours of direct testimony from convention delegates, and then debated and made final recommendations to be presented to the full convention. Ideas and proposals contained in a variety of local union resolutions were recommended and/or incorporated into other resolutions going to the floor for adoption. After lengthy discussion and debate, over the three long days of the convention, every single one of all three committees’ recommendations was overwhelmingly adopted by the convention delegates.

UHW “*Platform for Change*” Rejected – Seen By Delegates as Just Another Attempt To Hold On To Status Quo – A Less Than SMART Strategy – A Continuation of “*Just Us*” Unionism

Debate within our union on policy, program and leadership is critical to our vitality as a democratic movement for workers. Our convention was conducted with deep respect for this democratic process and for the voice of the minority. However, now that the majority of delegates has spoken, it’s important to reflect on the depth of support for the Justice for All Program going forward.

Despite more than a year of intensive, nationwide campaigning (ripe for exploitation by employers, anti-union politicians and rival unions), including a number of public web

sites promoting UHW's "*Platform for Change*" and its so-called "reform" effort, and reportedly spending enormous sums of dues money, the "*Platform for Change*" failed to win any significant support. In fact, the effort actually lost significant support outside of UHW that it may have had early on around specific issues.

In an effort to lower expectations after months of public boasting about the "growing" support for his "reform" program, UHW President Sal Rosselli was reported by Michelle Ambler of the BNA Daily Labor Report to have said that coming into the convention the local had no expectations of passing anything, but its definition of winning was revised as "*coming out with more elected leaders from more locals supporting us" than before the convention began.*" *That never happened:*

- No principal leader of another local union outside of UHW supported the UHW program.
- There was no expansion of support for UHW's program except among a small group of higher paid workers with better benefits in a few California public sector local unions.
- The UHW program had support from only 6 convention delegates and no principal local union leaders outside of California.
- Within the SEIU Healthcare Division - where this program debate had been waged by UHW for over two years - only 2 health care delegates outside UHW supported the UHW plan for organizing health care workers and voted for Sal Rosselli's bid for a vice president position on the IEB. In fact, Rosselli garnered majority support in just two locals other than UHW (L.2579, and L. 1021) - both California based. He received less than 7% of the votes of the non-UHW delegates, and not a single delegate vote from 86% of the locals (72 locals) voting at the convention.
- In the only other counted vote at the Convention (other votes were standing votes and overwhelmingly clear) UHW's request for a roll call vote received only 125 delegate votes, even though UHW themselves had 90 delegates (400 votes were needed to adopt the motion).
- The bottom line: Convention delegates chose by over 90% the *Justice for All* program and rejected "*Just Us*" unionism.

(**Note:** UHW and nominators for their candidates repeatedly asked delegates to elect just one rank-and-file-member to the International Executive Board – nine rank-and-file members were elected to international office as members of the Stern Unity slate.)

By any reasonable and honest definition the UHW/Rosselli "reform" effort was resoundingly rejected. Here is how the New York Times put it upon the close of the convention:

June 5, 2008

President of Union Wins Fight Over Power

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

“Andy Stern, the president of the Service Employees International Union, went into its convention under heavy fire from one of its largest locals, but he emerged stronger — overwhelmingly re-elected for another four years and with his power consolidated...

His fiercest in-house critic, Sal Rosselli, president of a California local representing 140,000 health care workers, said of Mr. Stern: “*He succeeded in getting his plans passed. He emerged with more authority.*”...

Nelson Lichtenstein, a professor of labor history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said: “I am impressed with Andy Stern’s ambition for his organization and for the labor movement. He has a program that we’re going to organize another 500,000 workers. They’re putting money into it. It’s not just bluster.”

Senator [Barack Obama](#), the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, spoke by satellite to the convention on Wednesday, with the delegates vowing to do their utmost to get him elected.

In an unusual move, Mr. Stern said, “I pledge we will, before the next convention,” gain legislation “that guarantees affordable health care for every man, every woman and every child.” He also pledged that Congress would pass legislation to make it easier to unionize millions of additional workers...”

Historical Context – A Comparison To Prior “Reform” Campaigns

There have been three contested “reform” campaigns since 1992 regarding the direction and leadership of the International Union.

1992 – Make the Best Better

At the 1992 SEIU Convention a group of locals calling themselves *Make the Best Better* (MTBB) proposed changes on a series of issues and ran a group of local union leaders for office. The MTBB program included the following:

1. **Per Capita Increases** – Proposed that the 85 cents per member per month per capita increase should be earmarked for organizing, political education, and increasing strike fund protections.
2. **Full Disclosure on Policy Decisions and Financial Transparency** – Proposed full transparency on policy decisions; IEB, Committee, and Division minutes; as well as all financial information, salaries, local union subsidies, and affiliation agreements, etc.
3. **U.S. Healthcare Reform** – Proposed that SEIU should take a strong position in support of a single payer, Canadian-style system.
4. **Organizing Assistance to Locals** – Proposed that Division Boards should have authority to develop strong local union organizing programs and what kind of assistance they should receive.

5. **Prohibit Dual Salaries** – Proposed to end dual salaries for VPs and IEB members, and instead reimburse locals for expenses and time spent on International union work.
6. **Election of Division Boards and Leaders** – Proposed to have local unions elect Division Boards and leaders.
7. **Direct Elections of Officers and IEB** – Proposed to make sure that SEIU officers and IEB should reflect gender and racial make-up and diversity of the membership, and study issue of direct elections for the future.
8. **Organizing** – Proposed to increase organizing commitment and resources.

Prior to the opening of the 1992 convention, leaders of MTBB sent out letters to convention delegates laying out the reform proposals above, calling for an open and honest debate, and celebrating the accomplishments of the union. The letter was signed by the principal officers or directors of twenty local unions making up over 14.5% of the convention delegates.

Although the MTBB proposals lost at the convention, it was widely believed that they received the support of 20-30% of the convention delegates. In the contested elections for Vice-President and IEB members, MTBB leaders (Jerry Brown, Sal Rosselli, Alice Dale, and Diane Sosne) received the votes of about 21% of the highest vote getter. Since 1992, the vast majority of issues raised by MTBB have been implemented and are part of the practice of our union today.

1996 Stern Insurgency/Defense of Committee on the Future

Leading up to the 1996 convention, Andy Stern ran a highly successful insurgent campaign in defense of the program developed by local union leaders through the lengthy work of the *Committee on the Future*, and for the presidency of the International Union after John Sweeney stepped down to lead the AFL-CIO. Upon announcing his candidacy as a challenger to then incumbent President Dick Cordtz and his strongest supporter, Gus Bevona of Local 32BJ, Stern was promptly fired and the SEIU headquarters was taken over by Cordtz and Bevona.

The Cordtz/Bevona program was similar in several respects to the recent UHW/Rosselli “*Platform for Change*,” including the following:

1. **Mergers** – Protecting “local union autonomy” and giving local unions veto power against any proposed mergers.
2. **National Bargaining** – Protecting “local union autonomy” and giving local unions veto power over any national, regional, area-wide, company-wide, or multi-employer collective bargaining agreements.
3. **Organizing** – Protecting “local union autonomy” in the conduct of organizing campaigns and programs.

The Stern insurgent effort, however, drew far more support than the Cordtz/Bevona program, and the Cordtz/Bevona Team eventually conceded prior to the convention. As a

result, the *Committee on the Future* Program was adopted, and the Stern Team was elected without opposition.

2008 UHW/Rosselli “Platform for Change”

UHW President Sal Rosselli led the most extensive, well-publicized and well financed campaign to change the direction of SEIU, with expenditures of enormous amounts of local union dues dollars. The *SMART* and *SEIU Voice* public website efforts had significant contact with local unions and members, used paid advertising, and received considerable attention from the traditional press, academics, and online writers.

The main UHW proposals were outlined in a letter to all convention delegates sent out just prior to the convention, in which Rosselli pointed out that “*since the year 2000, through a series of strategic organizing drives coordinated with other SEIU locals and our International Union, we have grown by more than 65,000 members*”, but, then went on to propose a set of principles protecting local union autonomy, including: a “*guarantee that local unions that are successfully organizing would not have to send more dues money to Washington, D.C.*” The “*Platform for Change*” letter was signed only by UHW leaders.

The Results – A Comparative Summary

By almost every reasonable measure the UHW/Rosselli effort was the LEAST successful of all three prior “reform” efforts:

Analysis

1. Election Support

1992 - The candidates running against the leadership slate for Vice-President received only 21% of the highest vote getter.

1996 - The candidates for office Gus Bevona (32BJ) and Dick Cordtz (International President) were supported by Locals 25, 144, 204 and 5000, and had gained the support of over 30% of the delegates before they withdrew in the face of defeat. Delegate Stern, an SEIU staff member, challenged the incumbent President for office and won.

2008 - The highest candidate running against the leadership slate for Vice-President (Sal Rosselli) received only 16% of the highest vote getter.

2. Support from Delegations

1992 - Significant locals from the largest Regions of the country supported candidates and the *Make the Best Better* program, and numerous whole delegations voted for the program.

1996 - Some of the largest locals from the US and Canada opposed the *Committee on the Future* plan, and entire delegations from those locals voted against the plan. In the end, the Stern insurgency won an unprecedented election victory after the incumbent President of SEIU withdrew.

2008 - Other than his own local (UHW), Sal Rosselli's efforts for election as Vice-President and in opposition to the Justice for All Plan:

- *Did not receive support from a single delegate from the Property Services Division.
- *Do not receive support from a single delegate from a Southern local.
- *Only received support from 2 delegates from his own Division's locals (healthcare) -- other than from his own local (UHW).
- *Only won support from 6 delegates from local unions outside of California (out of 888).
- *Only won 2 other delegations - both public sector workers - one with 2 delegates (Local 2579 CSU) in California, and one other delegation (Local 1021) headquartered in his Bay Area base in CA.
- *Had support from fewer top elected leaders of local unions than any of the 3 prior convention efforts.
- *In the only other counted vote at the Convention (other votes were standing votes and overwhelming clear) UHW's request for a roll call received only 125 total delegate votes (UHW had 90 delegates themselves).

CONSEQUENCES BEYOND THE CONVENTION AND VOTE

The UHW/Rosselli campaign relied heavily on negative external publicity, on the web, in email, and in regional and national print media, in an effort to win support for their program outside of SEIU. The UHW public campaign criticizing SEIU generated significant negative press about SEIU, its leadership, organizing agreements and locals. In both the mainstream press and progressive and left media, Rosselli and UHW received sympathetic coverage and wide airing of their views. While SEIU recognizes and fully respects the right of all members to speak freely and to air their views and criticisms, it is also the case that our public debates over internal matters, and the way in which we conduct them, can have significant consequences for organizing, progressive politics, and SEIU's future. The impact of the most recent negative public media and internet campaign has already been felt in at least two important areas:

- 1. Politics:** Anti-union politicians and corporations are using UHW's attacks on SEIU majority sign-up agreements as ammunition to oppose EFCA.
- 2. New Organizing:** CNA and employers are using UHW web sites and materials to buttress their attacks on SEIU and to discourage workers from joining SEIU.

CONVENTION ENDS WITH RESOLUTION CALLING FOR UNITY

Prior to the formal close of the Convention delegates nearly unanimously adopted a "Unity Resolution" stating, in part:

"Now it is time for us to get to work.

To successfully win Justice for All, we commit to coordinate our efforts and hold each other accountable to the decisions we have made. Reflecting the voice of the clear majority, we commit to act together, coordinate our work in organizing and bargaining, pool our resources, participate in democratic decision-making, and speak with one voice to politicians and our employers.

THEREFORE, all delegates commit to:

- Honor, respect, and implement the decisions made by this Convention.
- Hold each other accountable for these decisions.
- Have respect for all the voices that have made us stronger and pledge to engage in constructive debate going forward.

We have never been stronger than we are today. The time has come to make history together and seize our once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to win Justice for All.”